

Literary Ecology in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

SUTANUKA GHOSH 

. . . the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*

BANKIMCHANDRA Chattopadhyay (1838–1894), like his senior contemporary Charles Dickens (1812–1870) in *Bleak House* (1853), begins his 1866 novel *Kapalkundala* with a thick fog that causes a group of pilgrims returning from the Ganga Sagar to be led astray. Many of Bankimchandra's novels, including *Anandamath* (1882), begin with a natural phenomenon that is of literal and symbolic importance to the narrative. In nineteenth-century Bengal, particularly in the eastern region and the Sundarbans, with its extensive waterways that provided the primary mode of transport, weather events like fog or cyclone could be extremely dangerous. As a scholar of South Asian studies I became critically aware of such weather events that suggest chaos, capriciousness, and/or the fury of nature after beginning work on a collaborative project on literary ecology in nineteenth-century Bengal with my colleague Saswati Halder. In this project we seek to investigate the representation and interpretation of the relationship between humans and nonhuman nature in the context of the radical transformations in the physical, ideological, and epistemological landscapes that characterized nineteenth-century Bengal. The project will try to map the paradigmatic shifts taking place in the human-nonhuman relationship in Bengal as capitalistic and colonial forces “develop” and “civilize” a people and place that largely depended on a localized and largely sustainable agrarian economy.

This narrative of change can be traced back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the rational and instrumental

Sutanuka Ghosh is an assistant professor in the Department of English, Jadavpur University. Her PhD thesis from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, is on fictional writings by Bengali women on the independence and partition of India. She has presented widely and published journal articles on “intimacies,” “imagining love” and “women’s autobiographies.” Her research interests are in the areas of the long nineteenth century, postcolonial literatures, gender studies, life histories, trauma studies, and memory studies. She is currently working on a project on literary ecology in nineteenth-century Bengal with plans to extend the work into the twentieth century. She is the joint coordinator of the Centre for Victorian Studies at Jadavpur University.

Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 115–119.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

doi:10.1017/S1060150322000158

approach to nature associated with the Enlightenment helped bring about the Industrial Revolution in western Europe. Social and intimate relations between human beings and between the human and nonhuman were fashioned by a complex interplay of discoveries and incremental changes in technology, medicine, economy, education, and the subsequent transformations of social structures and cultural practices.

The mechanistic approach to nonhuman nature percolated down to nineteenth-century Bengal with the consolidation of the British East India Company as the dominant political and economic power. The history of the forced cultivation of indigo and opium in Bengal and the Gangetic hinterland, as well as the expanding tea plantations in the Darjeeling hills and Assam, represent not only narratives of abuse and exploitation of the native Indian population but also human—European and Indian—manipulation and exploitation of nature.

Our project seeks to create a space for reading the ecological turn in nineteenth-century Bengal within the domain of Victorian studies and environmental humanities, as a consequence of Bengal's encounter with imperialism, capitalism, and Enlightenment philosophy as manifested in Western technology and science—perceived, for example, in the setting up of the Zoological Garden (1876), the Botanical Garden (1787), and the Botanical Survey of India (1890) in Calcutta. This will in turn, I hope, enable us to perceive the relations between colonial Bengal and Victorian Britain within the domain of environmental humanities while connecting with the work being done on literary ecology by scholars like Jonathan Bate, Adelene Buckland, William A. Cohen, Scott Hess, Allan MacDuffie, Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D Morrison, Heidi C. M. Scott, Jesse Oak Taylor, and James Winter (among many others).

The project is recovering a set of diverse genres of texts (largely in Bengali) that have seldom been read for their ecological themes and concerns in order to see the ways in which these texts record/narrate the epochal shift to the Anthropocene, a transition of ideology and living practices from the localized “premodern” to the globalized “modern,” a shift in emphasis from microhistories embedded in “Nature” to national histories and histories of empire holding up the burden of “Culture.”

The first category of texts that the project is archiving and analyzing is the writing of literary luminaries of nineteenth-century Bengal like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). While writers and poets like Chattopadhyay and Tagore have been widely read, we would like to examine how, when, and where they witness the emergence of the Anthropocene and their

representation of the mutable and fluid terrain of the human-nonhuman relationship.

Another genre with interesting possibilities is the travel writings of Bengalis—men and women—who traveled across eastern and northern India, and across the oceans to Britain and other European nations, from the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. Even as they travel for sacred and/or secular reasons, to the Himalayas and elsewhere, writers record dried-up streams, shrunken lakes or rivers changing their course, storms and cyclones, changes to flora and fauna.

The project will also archive and analyze the scientific and other writings of the physicist Jagadishchandra Bose, whose most famous work, arguably, is in the area of plant physiology. We also intend to archive writings of other scientists and medical practitioners (particularly those following indigenous medical systems) who were working toward creating new repositories of knowledge of the natural world.

Last but certainly not the least, we will archive oral culture of nineteenth-century Bengal, particularly the folk music genres that refer to the intimate connections between the human and the nonhuman. In the early twentieth century eminent collectors like Dinesh Chandra Sen and the poet Jasimuddin sought to preserve oral culture in the form of the *Mymensingh Gitika* (1923) and *Purbobongo Gitika* (1926) (poems with stories of romance and adventure) and volumes on different genres of folk music sung by mystics, shepherds, boatmen, farmers, and so on. The project will also archive and analyze the audiovisual traditions like that of the *Patuas* that went on to influence the paintings of renowned artists of the Bengal School of Art like Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) and Jamini Roy (1887–1972). The paintings or *pat* “tell” traditional stories like that of Behula-Lokhindor as well as contemporary incidents like the Elokeshi-Mahanta scandal, accompanied by thick descriptions of the natural world and the living practices of the protagonists.

THOUGHTS ON METHODOLOGY

It is evident that even to begin to analyze the diverse genres of texts as outlined above, one must first map something like a natural history of Bengal, clearly noting the anthropogenic forces and their impact on the landscape and the flora and fauna. This will enable the researcher to establish the historic context/conditions of production of the generically

diverse body of texts. The obvious question that arises now is, what are the sources that could be mined to narrate the natural history of Bengal? For a start, one could look to the work of cartographers, searching for detailed maps of not only the province of undivided colonial Bengal but also the district and subdivisional maps, to trace the shifting geographies at the micro and macro level. Once the changes have been mapped, the next task would be to look at the causes that may have led a lake to shrink, a river to change its course, a green area to become arid. Further, one needs to map the expanding human footprint in terms of habitation (both urban and rural) and changes to the landscape as a result of technological advances/innovation, be it setting up railway lines and mechanized steamers, excavating mineral wealth, or setting up factories and printing presses. We also need to note the changes in agricultural practices such as the size of the area being used for cultivation, the kinds of crops being cultivated, and the technology and chemicals used to achieve better yields. A further resource could be the documents available at the institutions set up by imperial Britain like the Geological Survey of India, the Botanical Survey of India, and the Zoological Survey of India.

For reading the diverse range of texts, it might be fruitful to adopt a phenomenological approach. Since the focus of the panel is on location, the distinctive lifeworld of the producers of the texts (be it an individual or a collective) and the hermeneutic structure that animates the text would be better interpreted through the phenomenological approach. This should enable a nuanced understanding of the location as well as a polyphonic reading of the reception of and reaction to the Anthropocene. Simultaneously, it would be useful to creatively employ the Bakhtinian concept of “heteroglossia” to read the written, oral, and visual texts. If one recognizes nineteenth-century Bengal as a teeming contact zone where multiple encounters are taking place—not merely between Europeans and Indians—I think there is a compelling argument to be made in favor of heteroglossic reading of texts, variously located and produced. Finally, at the core of our project lies the shifting field of epistemological query, inflected with postcolonial theoretical concerns. For example, while on one hand we have the scientific knowledge emerging from studies in zoology, plant physiology, and so on (within colonial institutions), there are also the traditional knowledge systems with their wealth of knowledge about the natural world manifest in medical systems like Ayurveda or in the songs of the Bauls and boatmen. Therefore, any exploration of literary ecology in nineteenth-century

Bengal must also necessarily engage with multiple and/or contesting epistemologies, with the potential to open up new conversations within Victorian studies.

WORKS CITED

- Chattopadhyay, Bankimchandra. *Anandamath*. 1882. Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, 1938. ———. *Kapalkundala*. 1866. Calcutta, 1923.
- Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. 1853. New York: Vintage Classics, 2012.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2016.
- Ivanov, Vyacheslav. “Heteroglossia.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9, nos. 1–2 (June 1999): 100–102. www.jstor.org/stable/43102437.
- Smith, David Woodruff. “Phenomenology.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018). Edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology>.